People can't make "risk assessments" without knowing the risks

The "you do you" era of COVID mitigation invites the public to make their own risk assessments- while hiding the risks of infection from view

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Last week, Jason Gale of *Bloomberg* put out an excellent piece about post-COVID brain damage, titled “What We Know About Covid’s Impact on Your Brain.”

The piece is broad and draws on dozens of studies to paint a concerning picture of Your Brain on COVID. It’s not the first piece to do so in the mainstream press, but it’s one of a small handful over nearly half a decade. Gale’s piece gathers evidence pointing to increased risks of dementia, Parkinson’s disease, cognitive impairment, worsening of previous psychiatric conditions, and significant drops in IQ.

The piece goes on to mention viral persistence, immune system disruption and blood clots as linked to the cognitive impacts of COVID- all three are key targets of ongoing research into Long COVID. It’s a wonderful summary to help people get a picture of the enormous amount of research pointing to brain damage following COVID.

It also begs the question: why is the public learning potentially life-altering information about a virus they’ve almost certainly contracted multiple times now from the economics section of *Bloomberg*? (Or from *The Gauntlet*, for that matter?)

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I've written at length about the absurdity of attempting to individualize what is a collective problem. What was once a libertarian, far-right wing idea - disease control should be the territory of individuals, not society at large- was first promoted by Republicans, then mainstreamed by liberals in order to paint Biden's failed vaccine-only herd-immunity strategy as a success.

As we settled into a cycle of endless waves of disease driven by rapidly evolving new variants, our government and public health bodies continued to promote the fantasy that everyone can make their own decisions about whether or not to get infected.

Of course, anyone who does make the "risk assessment" that catching COVID is unsafe for them is functionally shut out of society. It's hardly a choice freely made, as the social and economic punishments for failing to "return to normal" continue to intensify.

But it wasn't enough to snatch away free tests, vaccines and COVID treatments, all but eliminate the isolation period for active infections, and push people to view disease control as a personal responsibility. Along with instructing people to make their own "risk assessments" about COVID, our government also downplays, minimizes, and flat out denies the risks of recurrent infections.

For example: COVID causes cognitive damage. That seems like an important piece of information to give to the American public while you encourage them to make risk assessments about whether or not contract it every year, does it not?

What about parents deciding to send their kids back to schools with zero precautions?

Should they be warned that COVID carries a significant risk of brain damage following infection, before deciding whether it's a good idea to let their children catch it twice a year?

And if that information is quite deliberately kept from the public by the same bodies failing to provide collective mitigations, are you asking people to make "risk assessments", or are you just pushing them to catch COVID?

Let's review what the public has been told about cognitive damage after COVID by the CDC, the President, the administration, and prominent media figures.

The CDC's twitter account has never tweeted the words "cognitive damage" or "brain damage" in reference to COVID. On March 23, 2023, the CDC twitter account posted its only reference to "brain fog":

> Common symptoms of Long COVID include fatigue, shortness of breath, fast heartbeat, & brain fog. If several weeks have passed since you had #COVID19 & you still have symptoms that interfere with your daily activities, talk to your doctor.
>
> Learn more: https://bit.ly/3mGtyny

The current CDC Director, Mandy Cohen, has never tweeted the words "cognitive damage," "brain damage" or "brain fog." Neither has former CDC Director Rachelle Walensky.

In interviews, Mandy, like the rest of the administration, likes to keep it vague. Brain damage is certainly not on the talking points menu; no specific outcomes are. We are "living with COVID". We "have the tools". She encourages vaccinations and not masks, the tool that can actually prevent infection. In a 2023 media tour about "rebuilding trust" with the public, she repeatedly refers to the pandemic in the past tense although the pandemic is ongoing according to the WHO.

Here's an interesting one: former White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Ashish Jha has tweeted about COVID brain damage once: on June 17, 2021, ten months *before* he joined the administration. He's since become a prominent minimizer who calls masking "fringe" and downplays post-COVID immune system dysregulation, but here's what he had to say in June 2021:

> Important study out of UK
>
> Worth your time
>
> Researchers examined brain MRIs of people before and after they got COVID, matched with controls
>
> What did they find?
>
> Substantial loss of grey matter in those who had gotten but recovered from COVID

> https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2021.06.11.21258690v1

Wow! Seems like the kind of thing the White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator would want to share with people, rather than never mention again.

And of course, the most subtle propaganda the Administration, fellow politicians, and CDC leaders employ is their refusal to mask or appear to mitigate COVID in any way. If each COVID infection carries a risk of brain damage, surely the Director of the CDC wouldn't constantly show up in public spaces - including airport terminals- maskless?

The President famously wouldn't even mask after testing positive for COVID, shortly before dropping out of his re-election campaign. He, certainly, has never talked about COVID's effects on the brain (if indeed, he's aware of them), instead using airtime to brag about defeating disease mitigation tools. "The pandemic is over," he incorrectly stated in the fall of 2022, "if you notice, no one is wearing masks," he went on to say, correctly identifying his success at stigmatizing COVID prevention.

Perhaps no single outlet is more responsible for the dishonest normalizing of continual COVID reinfections than the *New York Times* newsletter *The Morning* in the hands of David Leonhardt. During the mass death event of Omicron Wave 1, Dave was the main party responsible for the "omicron is mild" narrative (a lie) that spread round the world. This February, he "both sides'd" vaccinating children because, quote, "children are extremely unlikely to become seriously ill from Covid". As recently reported by *CBS News*, up to 5.8 million kids have Long COVID.

Of course, it's fantastic that *CBS News* is reporting on the damage that has been done to children by returning them to classrooms without upgraded ventilation or other mitigations. It would have been better if major media outlets had conveyed this risk before millions of children were disabled.

It's also great that *Bloomberg* is reporting about the brain damage that can follow COVID, deep diving the research and putting forward three of the most compelling explanations for Long COVID. But how many people, nearly five years into the crisis, know anything about this topic? How many people who are three, four, five infections in, consented to these risks when they took their masks off?

Who is responsible for this ignorance? Is it not the public health bodies and politicians charged with responding to the virus?

In interviews and speeches, it's not only cognitive damage that our elected leaders and public health officials fail to mention. President Biden has said the words "Long COVID" a handful of times publicly. Vice President Harris has never said them. Is this not bizarre to anyone who expects the Democratic party to convey scientific facts about the pandemic to the public? Is it not clearly an attempt to hide those harmed by the ongoing "let it rip" strategy from view?

When tens of millions of Americans are disabled by a virus on your watch, never uttering the name of the disease they have is deliberate, and leaves sufferers of Long COVID struggling with stigmatization in their personal lives. By enforcing silence around Long COVID at the top of the Biden Administration, in the CDC, and among media talking heads, the public is encouraged to doubt and dismiss the condition entirely.

If this administration is so certain the public would freely choose to ignore the millions suffering from Long COVID, the risks of infection including brain damage, the high rates of transmission in our communities, and continue to opt out of mitigations and mask wearing, why do they work so hard to hide all of the above?

Why do they, along with most other electeds on the Hill, pretend they have never heard the words Long COVID, refuse to acknowledge the ongoing toll of mass infection, and continue to push testing and data out of reach? Is this the behavior of leaders who are confident that the public has freely chosen to cruelly and deliberately abandon millions of people to long-term chronic illness, and to repeatedly risk joining them?

Or is it the behavior of leaders who know they are on borrowed time, sweeping the ever-growing body of evidence and ever-higher pile of victims under the rug while stubbornly repeating that "nobody is wearing masks"?

Scientists, advocates and reporters face an uphill battle getting information about the risks of repeated COVID infections to the public. It is uphill not because of the lack of studies, resources, victims, or voices, but because those who could do the most good

continue to use their platforms to do the most harm. As long as the public receives the message from our leaders that recurrent COVID infections aren't dangerous, the truth has a high wall of propaganda to hurdle.

Nevertheless, the truth continues to emerge via studies, articles, the people who've been harmed, and those who care. It's unfortunate that our public health officials and politicians will be remembered for hiding the facts about COVID, rather than disseminating them.

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Rick 2 hrs ago

Another great (in the sense of important, not in the sense of good news) article!

Yes, the lack of public health messaging is a crisis. For old folk like me, we remember the campaigns against smoking, to get polio vaccinations done, to encourage seat belt use in cars. The messages have to be loud, clear, and persistent. What we have is, well, silence.

Also, for any risk assessment to be useful (though you're entirely correct in that public health is NOT an individual effort, it's called "public" for a reason) not only do we need to know what the risks of infection are, but also the risk of getting infected. In May of 2023 all data other than wastewater went dark. Wastewater is important, but actual cases and outcomes is also important and is easily gathered.

This situation goes beyond depressing and into anger and despair.

Your writing is a light in the darkness. I have seen some tiny moments of change, a few more masks, and a quote from a covid aware teacher I know: "Other teachers are becoming more nervous about getting covid. They're not doing anything, but they're nervous."

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